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Opening Extract from...

Sirens

Written by Joseph Knox

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Very special indeed.’
LEE CHILD

‘A page-turner
with a beating heart.’
SARAH HILARY

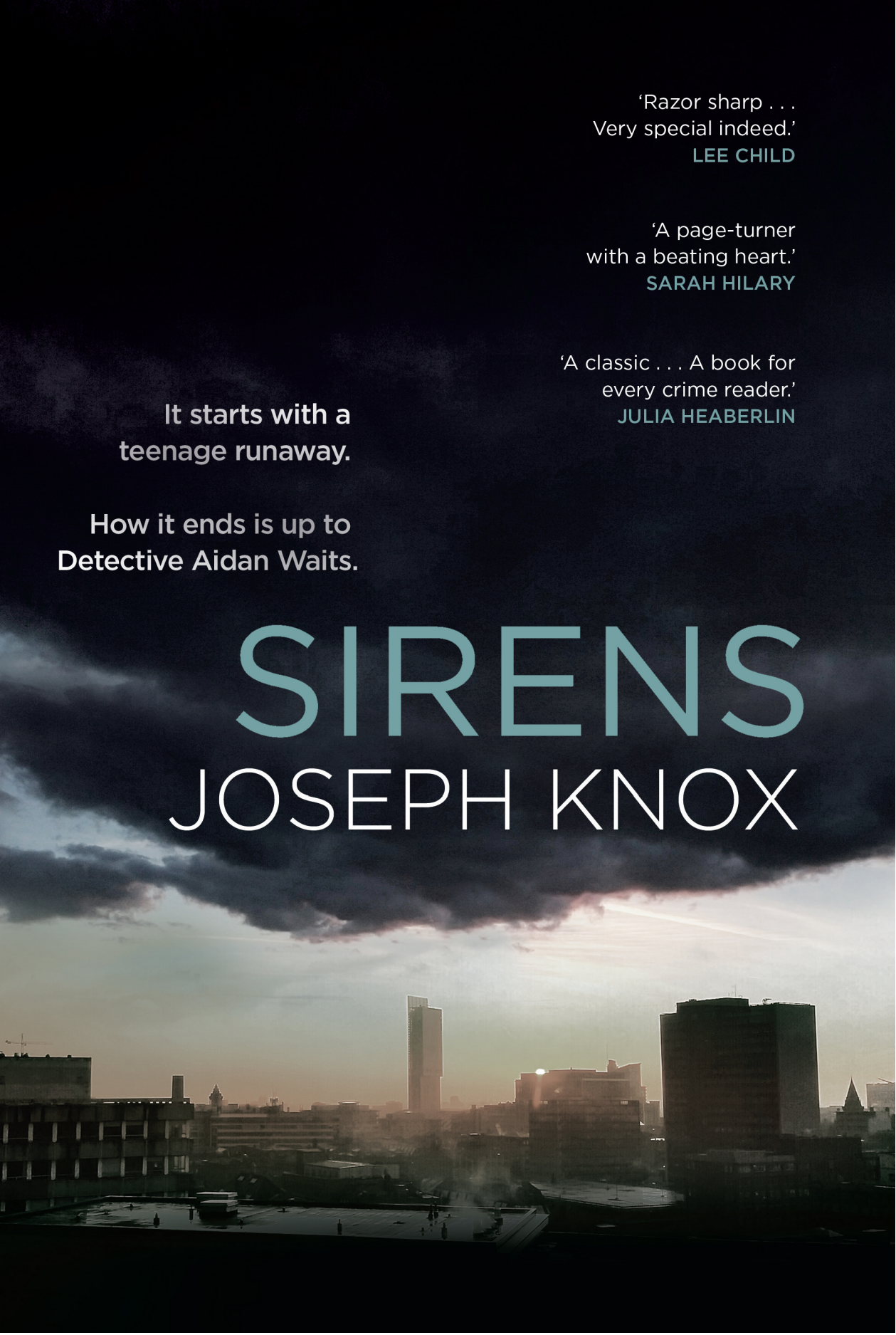
‘A classic . . . A book for
every crime reader.’
JULIA HEABERLIN

It starts with a
teenage runaway.

How it ends is up to
Detective Aidan Waits.

SIRENS

JOSEPH KNOX



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Afterwards I went back on to the night shift. They'd never trust me in the daylight again. I spent my time responding to 4 a.m. emergency calls, walking up and down dead escalators and trying not to think. I'd been good at that once. I could hardly believe it, a few months later, when I saw my breath in the air again. Saw November coming back around.

'Shittin' it down,' said Sutty, refusing to get out of the car. Sometimes it was hailstones and sometimes it was slush. Tonight it was sheet rain, catching the light and cleaning down the streets. They needed it. My partner handed me his newspaper and I got out of the car, holding it over my head as an umbrella.

We were responding to a call from the manager of a charity shop. I watched his mouth moving. He wanted me to shift along some homeless people sheltering in the building's doorway. It didn't make a lot of sense but, then again, I wasn't paying close attention. His nasal hairs were jet black and matted together, like the start of Hitler's moustache. I looked at the sleeping man and woman in the doorway, told him he was wasting police time, and walked back through the rain to the car.

I climbed inside and handed Sutty the wet newspaper, his punishment for not coming with me. He gave me a look and then turned to a dripping, folded-down page.

'See this?' he said, holding out the paper and gauging my reaction. 'No way to die, that, is it?'

The picture was blurred with rain, the text too, but I recognized the girl. She'd been one of a group, one of three I'd known briefly, the previous year. The subheading said she'd been twenty-three years old when she died. Twenty-two when I knew her. I looked out the window, at November, coming back around. She was the last of them. Sutty leaned in, cleared his throat with a graveyard cough.

'Come on,' he said. 'What happened there, really?'

I looked at him steadily. 'You're asking the wrong person.'

All I knew was where it had started, a year before. The three strikes against me and all the reasons I couldn't say no. I couldn't have explained the girls, the women, who had briefly entered my life. Briefly changed it. He wouldn't have understood their laughs, their indignations, their secrets. For the rest of the night my eyes drifted to the people on the street, the girls, the women, and I felt like I was seeing the lives they wouldn't live.

I got home in the early hours of the morning, made myself a drink and sat down. I flicked around the radio stations until I couldn't put it off any longer. I reread the newspaper and let myself think about it properly for the first time in months.

'You're killing me,' she'd said.

What had happened there, really?

1

The young couple crossed over to avoid me, and I heard the jingle of loose change in someone's pocket.

A street you see every day can look unfamiliar, lying face down on the ground, and it took me a minute to work out where I was. The pavement was frozen. Low-hanging fog blurred the air, and nothing could pass through it without being altered somehow. It threw the whole city out of focus, taking the shine out of another Friday night.

My left arm had gone numb and I rolled off it to check the time. The face of my watch was shattered. Assuming it had stopped when I hit the floor, assuming that had only been a few minutes ago, I still had over an hour. I could get into some dry clothes and be at the bar in plenty of time to see the handover. I felt my way up a wall and got to my feet. My face hurt and my brain felt like it had come loose, rattling around inside my skull, erasing pin numbers and names of childhood friends.

I watched the young couple disappear into the fog. In spite of social media, CCTV and the state, we still live in a world where you can disappear if you want to. Or even if you don't. It had been about a month since the story leaked.

A month since I'd gone missing.

I felt the back of my head where someone had just hit it, hard. My wallet was still in my pocket, so I hadn't been mugged. I'd been warned. There was no one else around but I could feel eyes all over me.

The street swayed and I held on to a lamp post to steady it.

When I started to walk I went for long stretches with my eyes closed, not even thinking about bumping into things.

Turning a corner, I found myself on Back Piccadilly, immediately recognizing its exhausted red-bricks by their external fire escapes. These buildings wall in a narrow alley on both sides, making a claustrophobic throughway. The evening rain had caught the moonlight, and I started walking out of nostalgia as much as anything. There was an all-night coffee shop at the other end, and I'd spent some time there in another life. It had been years since I stopped going, and the city had changed so much that I knew I wouldn't see any of the old faces.

I was a few steps into the alleyway when I heard a car start behind me. An engine growled into life, flexing its muscles before falling into a smooth rumble. Light flooded the narrow path and a crooked silhouette grew out from my feet.

Thinner than I remembered it.

I looked over my shoulder, into blinding high-beams. The car was idling at the alleyway's entrance. *Nothing to see here*. I turned and kept walking. I was halfway along when the beams shook. When they started following me.

The engine revved and the car moved closer. It sounded just two or three feet behind, and I knew then that I'd never really disappeared. I could feel the headlights, burning into my back. I didn't want to turn and look through them at the driver any more. I was afraid of who it might be.

I pressed myself into an alcove so the car could pass. It stayed where it was for a few seconds. Squinting into the light I saw a BMW, all gleaming black paint and chrome. I could feel the night in my lungs. The blood, singing through my veins. A window came down but I couldn't see inside.

'Detective Constable Waits?' said a man.

'Who's asking?'

I heard a woman's laughter from the passenger side.

'We're not asking, handsome. Get in.'

2

The rain tapping against the windscreen was making faces at me. My veins felt threadbare and weak, and I sat in the back of the car trying to make a fist for my own amusement. I thought of the speed in my coat pocket.

'True what they say, then?' said the driver, reading my mind. He looked to be in his late forties. He had broad shoulders and weaved them like a middleweight each time he turned the wheel. He wore a fitted suit jacket, charcoal grey in colour, which nearly matched the hair on his head. When he used the rear-view mirror it was casually, looking through me like I wasn't there. The woman was a dishwater blonde with an efficient ponytail.

I didn't say anything.

In the back seat I felt the chill of my sodden clothes and clenched my jaw to keep from shivering. The only thing in the car that hadn't come straight from the showroom was a police scanner. It was turned right down. I could smell a designer vanilla perfume but didn't recognize the brand. It didn't match either of the people in the front seats, though. It smelled like money, like youth.

We were driving emphatically away from where I'd been. Out of the nightlife, the glare. Past the empty shops and the going-going-gone local businesses. The huge, vacant buildings. The dying high street.

'What's he want?' I said.

The man made eye contact in the mirror. 'Didn't ask.'

We pulled on to Deansgate.

Over a mile in length, Deansgate stretches from one side of the city to the other. In that space it does it all, from invite-only restaurants to down-and-out soup kitchens, with everything you can think of in between.

'Well, where is he?'

'Beetham Tower.'

I must have sworn.

'Been there before have you?' said the woman.

The tallest building outside the capital, Beetham Tower had been one of several skyscrapers planned for the city. The idea was to expand further and further upward, each structure a few metres taller than the last, like some great, dull-metal graph, charting endless growth. Developers had decided they could make millions by mortgaging small, overpriced rooms to single men and women, our only commodity. But their heads had been in the clouds. When the economy came crashing down around them, the owners, investors and builders lost everything. The male suicide rate rose slightly and everyone else carried on.

Now, most of these derelict building sites are cannibalized for scrap. The others are left to rot, collecting rainwater in exposed foundations. Rusting like open sores in the ground. There were times during its three-year construction when it seemed that even Beetham Tower wouldn't be finished. It went up, though, in spite of everything, extended like a middle finger to the entire city.

We turned off Deansgate and pulled up to the tower's car port. A beaming valet dressed like Sinatra leaned into the window. He recognized our driver at first sight, stopped smiling and waved us on, down to the subterranean car park.

3

Beetham Tower is shared by a Hilton hotel, residential apartments and, right at the top, bespoke penthouse suites.

Although the structure itself is streamlined, the four-storey annexe at its base is much broader. It has to be, containing as it does a ballroom, swimming pool, and the smiling sons and daughters of the top 2 per cent. The walls of the lobby and lobby bar are made almost entirely from windowed glass. The design is such that, should someone accidentally look outside, all they'd see is their own reflection.

I had been here before.

The previous year, after a young woman crashed through a nineteenth-floor window and fell to her death. Dasa Ruzicka was an underage sex-worker from the Czech Republic. She had been trafficked through Europe when she was fourteen, having been sold by her father to a local trader. It was easy to take girls from these places because they went missing so often. Each one was camouflaged against a backdrop of habitual disappearance. But there was another, more elemental, reason she was taken.

Dasa had been beautiful, and not the emaciated version of it they throw around these days. She gave meaning back to the word. Her clear complexion had naturally lent itself to sex work because, in spite of all the sadness life could parade past it, she went on looking pure somehow. A recurring frustration of my job was that girls, women, were things to fuck and throw punches at. To throw

through windows. I wondered what it said about us now, that graceful was the worst thing you could be.

I was sure Dasa couldn't have propelled herself through the window with such force. The hotel room she fell from had been empty, though. I kept guests and staff there for hours, questioning anyone whose key card might have allowed them access to the floor. When enough money had complained, a Detective Inspector was sent to relieve me. I took him into an empty room on the nineteenth floor, tried to explain the situation.

When he still wouldn't listen I backed off towards the door, my eyes on the window. The city below. He realized what I was about to do and shouted at me to stop. I ran at the glass to see the look on his face as much as anything, but he managed to get in the way before I could hit it.

It was the second of three strikes against me that would eventually lead to front-page news. To my total disgrace. To my taking the only job left open to me.

Dasa's death went down as a suicide and stayed that way.

I hadn't been back to Beetham Tower since.